

Riding the Elevator

Using the MBTI® tool in Executive Coaching

Imagine you are riding an elevator. For you, the top floor is the logic and reasoning floor, a natural place to start when making decisions when you have a Thinking preference. The ground floor is the heart and values level (Feeling preference), the next level down for you when making a decision. For your co-worker, on the elevator beside you, the floor descriptors are the same, but the direction they travel is different. They start at the main floor (they have a Feeling preference) and ride up to the attic (Thinking preference) to make a decision. Each of you may make the same decision, but the journey you travel is much different.

Executive coach, Laurie Hillis uses the elevator metaphor to help her clients understand “that all the preferences they need are accessible to them, but they may have a longer or shorter ride and a different starting point,” depending on the clarity of their Thinking or Feeling preferences, their level of self-awareness and their Type development.

Citing leadership guru Marshall Goldsmith, Hillis says that for many of her clients, “the qualities that got them where they are won’t necessarily get them further.” The skills that earn promotion are not what are needed in the next level of their leadership development. They may in fact, have to stop doing some of the things that made them successful in the past in order to succeed in the future. She recalls a bright, successful individual whose Thinking scores were very clear. The logic and reasoning abilities that made him a rising star and earned him promotion to executive management were still very useful. But, as a leader of people versus a leader of technical areas, he needed to better access compassion and empathy—commonly referred to as emotional intelligence—his Feeling preference.

The power to change how you relate to people is profound and the skills learned go beyond the workplace. When describing his challenges to Hillis, the above-mentioned client related that when his child brought home a report card, he honed in on the Cs first, then the Bs and finally the As. “This person had a long elevator ride down to access his Feeling floor,” says Hillis. But once given clear insight into his personality, he recognized that he could access other floors to develop complementary skills and reach his staff—and connect to his family—better.

In another example, Hillis worked with a team of senior executives who experienced challenges guiding their employees, highly technical people, through major changes. “These executives were mostly big picture people (Intuitive preference) not uncommon for their roles and seniority, and it was a powerful moment when they realized that they were talking an entirely different language than their predominantly Sensing preference workforce,” notes Hillis. The MBTI® tool gave them a common language, insight into the challenges that the proposed changes were presenting to the organization, and the tools to communicate and guide them to the future more humanely and effectively.

Hillis stresses that “preferences are not destiny,” and the MBTI assessment is not prescriptive: it is intended for healthy, whole individuals, thus it is a powerful tool for classic leadership challenges; helping people clarify how to further their careers, be better leaders and get better results from their teams.

As well the Myers-Briggs Type® Indicator, particularly the Step II Interpretive report, provides concrete suggestions that allow people in leadership positions to experience self-awareness and insight. These tools help Hillis provide her clients with strategies to be better for others. “It helps executives to avoid potential blind spots.” Business is always about people, stresses Hillis. “It is about finding the right fit; aligning the right people with the right work.”

Laurie Hillis has been an executive coach for over fifteen years and is Principal of Megatrain Inc. She is a senior faculty member at the University of Alberta, in their Centre for Executive Education and Lifelong Learning. Hillis has worked actively with the Southern Alberta Chapter of APTi (SAAPT).

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